

The deadly outcome of school reopenings:

Four US school employees and two college students killed by COVID-19 this week

By Renae Cassimeda
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Over the past week, at least three K-12 school employees, one college instructor, and two college students have died from COVID-19. At least 30 K-12 teachers and school employees have died from COVID-19 since late July, when schools began to reopen en masse, sending millions of students and teachers back into unsafe classrooms across the US.

Tragically, 57-year-old South Carolina teacher Shirley Bannister died on Sunday, less than three weeks after her daughter Demi Bannister, 28, also a teacher in South Carolina, died from COVID-19 on September 7.

Shirley Bannister, a nursing instructor at the Midlands Technical College in Columbia, South Carolina, succumbed to the virus after battling it for over two weeks. She became severely ill roughly three days after her daughter's death. Bannister's sister-in-law, Shirley Mills Bannister, told the media that she had gone to the hospital three times complaining of symptoms before being admitted for treatment.

"I just heard her saying, 'Shirley...they won't test us, they won't let me get any treatment because they say that my symptoms are not severe enough and I need treatment,'" the relative told local media.

The fact that a nursing instructor whose daughter recently died from COVID-19 could not get treatment is an indictment of the entire political establishment and both parties, which have allowed schools and businesses to open, crowding hospitals that have already been under strain. Responsibility for this crime lies squarely with the Trump administration and the Democratic and Republican parties, which have worked in tandem to promote policies of herd immunity predicated on letting the virus rip through the population.

Shirley's daughter, Demi Bannister, had just started her fifth year at Windsor Elementary School when she tested positive for coronavirus on September 4 and died three days later. She had been forced to return to her school site in the Richland 2 School District for pre-service preparation days when she contracted the virus.

Within the span of two weeks, Shirley's husband Dennis Bannister has lost his wife and their only daughter. The risk of the virus attacking and killing multiple members of a family

and the inter-generational consequences is widely known, but pro-corporate politicians have pressed ahead with deadly school reopenings.

A statement on Shirley's Bannister's death posted on social media by Midlands Technical College president Dr. Ronald Rhames has received many comments from colleagues and students. Jenn R wrote, "She was a mentor and was always available to a student who needed help & guidance. She truly was amazing. ... I love you Mrs B! Thank you for your guidance and encouragement." Lauren B commented, "Many people are nurses today because of this exemplary woman. Her legacy and contribution to our society lives on. ..."

Another tragic death this week was that of Michelle McCrackin, 53, a K-6 Title I paraprofessional at Carson City-Crystal (CC-C) Schools in Montcalm County, Michigan, who died early last Friday, just two days after the district closed due to a COVID-19 outbreak.

As of Monday, Michelle McCrackin's burial has been postponed due to one of her five children testing positive for COVID-19. McCrackin was yet another school employee, beloved by her students, colleagues, and community, who met an unexpected and unnecessary death.

The CC-C school district has since switched to online learning until at least October 4 after it became the first school district in Montcalm County to experience a COVID outbreak. A total of 14 staff members were asked to quarantine due to having had direct contact with McCrackin, who had reported a positive case of the virus on Tuesday. By Wednesday, three more staff members had tested positive, as well as a student who had no contact with any of those staff members.

Jody Jenkins, 57, a school superintendent of the Atkins School District in Little Rock, Arkansas, died Tuesday, September 29, due to complications from COVID-19. Jenkins announced on September 13 that he had tested positive for the virus and had been hospitalized for the past several days.

Jenkins caught COVID-19 earlier in the school year and was recovering at home until his symptoms worsened. In a statement on social media, one parent of a student at Atkins Middle School wrote, "son is an 8th grade student at AMS. He

was telling me a few days ago that it has been ‘so weird’ not having Mr. Jenkins at school. ... I hope he knew and hope that his family knows that even if he was just handing out a milk at lunch, it wasn’t unnoticed and his students appreciated all of his efforts. ...”

Classes resumed in Arkansas last month, and the state has reported that there are 717 active cases in public schools throughout the state. The state is requiring schools to be open five days a week for in-person instruction, though they can also offer virtual or hybrid options as well.

Also this week, an unnamed school employee in the Middleton School District in Idaho reportedly passed away from COVID-19. District Superintendent Kristen Beck said in a recent statement that other school employees have tested positive and have not yet recovered. She also noted that Middleton High School students and staff are in quarantine and an elementary teacher is in quarantine and “is not doing well.”

Despite the news of an employee’s death, the district and school board are pushing for a full reopening in the coming weeks. At present, schools are implementing a hybrid model for all students and will decide October 12 whether or not to move from their current hybrid learning model into a modified hybrid model where kindergarten through fifth-grade students switch into full-time, in-person learning.

During a recent board meeting, trustee Derek Moore suggested moving kindergarten through fifth-grade to a morning and afternoon schedule, so students could go to school every day, but in smaller groups. “We can’t run and hide,” Moore callously stated, adding, “I know we have cases, but we cannot decide not to move forward. There are going to be hiccups in the road.”

When Moore says there will be “hiccups,” he means further deaths and suffering for educators, students and their families. It should go without saying that the arbitrary movement of schedule will do absolutely nothing to prevent teachers and students from becoming infected and possibly infecting their loved ones.

Nationally, there are on average more than 40,000 reported coronavirus cases each day, adding to the nearly 7.4 million total infections in the United States. At least 750 people die each day from the pandemic, with a total of 210,000 lives lost in the US alone.

As the WSWS reported this week, the reopening of K-12 schools and colleges has undoubtedly contributed to the rise in cases nationwide. As a result of college reopenings, at least two university students tragically died from COVID-19 over the past week.

Chad Dorrill, a 19-year-old student athlete at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, died Tuesday. According to a statement from Chancellor Sheri Everts, Dorrill was attending classes online and living off-campus, and was diagnosed with the coronavirus earlier in September.

Appalachian State University reported a new high of 180

current COVID-19 cases among students on Wednesday. Nearly 550 students have tested positive for the virus since in-person classes resumed last month. Despite news of Dorrill’s death, Appalachian State, part of the University of North Carolina system, will continue to offer a blend of fully face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses.

Jezreel Lowie B. Juan, a student at University of Hawaii West Oahu, died Friday from COVID-19. Juan had transferred to the West Oahu campus in 2019 as a junior after attending Honolulu Community College. A university spokeswoman said Wednesday, “As a first-generation immigrant, his drive to work in the STEM field to make his family proud became clear as he spoke passionately about his degree and what it could afford him and his family.”

UH West Oahu is open to university students and employees and closed to the general public. The university is one of 10 college campuses in the University of Hawaii system that began their academic year on August 24.

These recent deaths and the hundreds that have been reported since the onset of the pandemic are the result of a criminal conspiracy by the Trump administration and state governments to cover up the threat of the virus among young people in order to push through school reopenings and the broader reopening of the economy.

Documents recently obtained by the *New York Times* show that Deborah Birx, the White House coronavirus response coordinator, and Marc Short, Vice President Mike Pence’s chief of staff, told the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to downplay the threat of the coronavirus to young people.

The CDC was asked by White House staff to provide data that showed cases among young people were decreasing, and that showed young people have the lowest COVID-19 mortality rates. No consideration was given to the numerous accounts of severe illness among children or their ability to spread the pandemic to others, much less the actual mortality rate itself.

The CDC has been manipulating its guidelines to state that young people are less impacted. In recent weeks, CDC guidelines have also been changed to no longer reflect the fact that the virus is transmitted through aerosolization.

The deaths of these six school employees and students are only a few tragic examples that show the virus is in fact deadly to elderly and young people alike and has immense consequences for families and whole communities.

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